

Research on Diversity in Youth Literature

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 6

January 2020

Reading Relational in Mildred D. Taylor: Toward a Black Feminist Care Ethics for Children's Literature

Wesley S. Jacques

Clayton State University, wesleyjacques@clayton.edu

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Recommended Citation

Jacques, Wesley S. (2020) "Reading Relational in Mildred D. Taylor: Toward a Black Feminist Care Ethics for Children's Literature," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol2/iss2/6>

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Mildred Taylor's 1976 Newbery Award-winning novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* features a Black family in the rural Mississippi of the 1930s and thoughtfully explores this family's interiority in the face of economic depression and racial prejudice. In this second installment of the five-part saga following young Cassie Logan and her family, Taylor presents readers with the sorts of multi-generational and community-situated relationships that contribute to the development of ethical identity. Nine-year-old Cassie narrates a reliably transparent account of ethical decision-making across lines of race, economics, and age. From the beginning of the novel, as an already derelict school starts in late fall for Black children obliged to farming duties, to when the Logan farm is set ablaze in hopes of preventing a lynching of a young man at the novel's end, the critical evaluation of actions, policies, and even political identities is situated pointedly in terms of its child characters, readers, and their hard-earned education in racial injustice. That is, even as the story presents formal educators, business owners, community leaders, and friends as morally compromised by Jim Crow-era white supremacy, Taylor's novel suggests that young people remain indispensable to ethical work, both in theory and in praxis. Cassie and her first-person perspective are squarely placed at the core of this narrative work.

As the Great Depression falls more heavily upon the four hundred acres of Logan land than it does the surrounding more than ten-square miles of white-owned plantations, readers experience the world Taylor imagines wholly through Cassie Logan's discerning eyes. As narrator, Cassie is also eavesdropper, overhearer, loyal sister, doting daughter, dutiful granddaughter, good student, budding activist, and adolescent curator of trans-generational histories—roles inseparable from her identity as a young Black woman inhabiting both a geopolitical space at odds with that identity and a family dedicated to affirming it. Early in the

novel, she listens intently as her father explains the Logan family's legacy and the complicated sort of ownership she enjoys. Taylor writes:

He took my hand and said in his quiet way: "Look out there, Cassie girl. All that belongs to you. You ain't never had to live on nobody's place but your own and long as I live and the family survives, you'll never have to. That's important. You may not understand that now, but one day you will. Then you'll see." (7)

Cassie's understanding develops as the narrative progresses. On her family's farm, enveloped by economic depression, white landowners, and the political oppression that comes along with it, Cassie's education and her growing connection to the land her ancestors had toiled on as slaves are all constituent parts of what makes the ethical framework developed in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* both potent and remarkable. This framework is rendered through earnest conversations that contextualize America's history of racial injustice and the relational bonds shared by characters young and old, children and their parents, siblings with one another, communities and their defenders, families and their elders, Cassie and her land. Likewise, a special attention toward the vulnerable—political, economic, or otherwise—permeates the whole story, which, as this article contends, offers fecund ground for theorizing the possibility of a Black feminist care ethics. With this in mind, I present three interconnected arguments: firstly, feminist ethics of care, as a relational ethic interpreted first by Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings from the unique experiences of women, offers an undeniably generative vocabulary for equitable readings of children's literature. Secondly, integrating the rhetoric of care ethics with Black feminist thought, calling upon the work of scholars from Patricia Hill Collins to Jennifer Nash among others, reveals that considerations of alternate standpoints—not simply adult, white women—add significantly to politically-attuned ethical praxis. Lastly, Taylor's novel thoughtfully illustrates

and effectively theorizes, in its own right, a Black feminist care ethic that is simultaneously critical of how we, as a plurality of peoples, care for one another while reifying the radical potential of care.

“To understand and appreciate care ethics” writes Noddings in “The Language of Care Ethics,” “one must become acquainted with the basic ideas and language” (53). In discussing the growing popularity of the rhetoric of care ethics since its inception in the 1980s, Noddings emphasizes that, fundamentally, “care ethics is a relational ethic,” detailing “the *caring relation*” and its constituent roles of “carer” and “cared-for” (53). Key qualities of the carer include being attentive and responsive to the expressed needs of the cared-for. “She responds positively to the need if she has the resources to do so and if doing so will not hurt others in the web of care” (Noddings 53). The cared-for’s role, on the other hand, is described by Noddings as relatively simple but nonetheless essential. She explains:

[The cared-for] responds in a way that shows that the caring has been received, recognized. When an infant stops crying and smiles in response to his mother’s caress, when a student energetically pursues a topic after the educator’s encouragement, when a patient breathes a sigh of relief under the nurse’s gentle touch, when a library user works effectively with new technology under the librarian’s direction, the caring relation has been completed. Without this response, there is no caring relation no matter how hard the carer has worked at it. (53)

From this description, a relational ethic can be distinguished plainly by its attention to the particulars of the relationship between two parties as opposed to any claims of the inherent virtue of either party. That is, a carer isn’t a carer unless the cared-for responds accordingly within the context of their relationship.

This interpretation of care ethics as relational has been readily adopted in fields such as childcare or health care due, in part, to the histories of gendered work in these fields as well as the presumed fixity of what party is the carer and who is the cared-for. Presumably, mothers care for children just as teachers for students just as librarians for library users just as nurses for their patients. While these linearly established roles are certainly not representative of all caring relationships, which in itself reveals a potential limitation of Noddings' interpretation of the *caring relation*, literary narratives often allow for more palpable identification of carer and cared-for due to how explicitly relationships are represented in text and the nature of "the reading transaction," as Louise M. Rosenblatt coins it (4). As we read a text, Rosenblatt suggests, "we assume that it should give rise to some kind of coherent meaning," which enables us to adopt a selective attitude or stance, "bringing certain aspects to the center of attention and pushing others into the fringes" (4-5). Readers essentially transact with a text to generate meaning suiting to whatever roles they adopt. Arguably then, the transaction occurring between readers and texts is analogous to the caring relation described by Noddings because, to borrow again from Rosenblatt's theory, "each element conditions and is conditioned by the other in a mutually-constituted situation" or relation (Rosenblatt 2). For instance, Cassie Logan is convincingly presented to young readers as a daughter and a student, traditionally delineated cared-for roles definitive of relational ethics. Nonetheless, as a sibling, a member of a vulnerable community, a young Black woman descending from slaves, she noticeably challenges the apparent linearity of the caring relation and in turn enriches the reading transaction for those historically neglected by traditional caring relations. That is, just as the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) affirms, "the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us," Cassie's characterization affirms a uniquely Black feminist

care ethics because there may exist no alternative for her (273). While Noddings identifies a relationship between a carer and the cared-for, a Black feminist care ethic challenges this relationship within the context of the political realities that underpin inequity, acknowledging that not all care is created equal. In this, a Black feminist care ethic is not only invested in our relationships to one another but critical of our relationships to power. Applying this framework to reading *Roll of Thunder* demonstrates how liberation through ethical care is both possible and obtainable. Toward this end, while this article focuses on Taylor's intra-narrative relationships and ethical configurations, the question of how young readers and the texts prescribed to them relate to and care for one another remains important nonetheless.

Thus, the methodology taken up by this article is in direct conversation with the work of Mary Moran as she remains one of surprisingly few scholars engaging children's and adolescent literature with feminist care ethics. In Moran's "Making a Difference: Ethical Recognition through Otherness in Madeleine L'Engle's Fiction," she argues that the ethical commentary and feminist critique featured in *A Wrinkle in Time* and the other titles in the "Time Quintet" that follow Meg Murry and her family suggest ways to better understand the phenomenon of othering and effectively relate to those who are different from ourselves in hopes of ultimately addressing human needs. Basing her relational ethics on the work of Gilligan, Noddings, and Susan Sherwin, Moran writes:

From the very beginning these books call our attention to the human habit of othering: seeing those who differ from us, those who challenge our assumptions about what is normal, first as irredeemably strange and threatening, and then as inferior in order to defuse that threat. (77)

Although othering in L'Engle's work literally presents itself in all sorts of fantastical shapes and sizes, the grounded historical fiction of Mildred Taylor similarly asks readers to consider the other with explicit regards to race. Without overstating the parallels between the Logans and the Murrys, which may or may not be worthwhile in and of itself, this article models its invocation of feminist care ethics after Moran's because of her emphasis on identity and relationality. As she argues for connection and empathy through apparent difference, many invaluable theoretical threads are provided to address one of the major questions at hand here: *how* do we, as individuals and communities, care about each other?

To even begin to answer this, two key aspects of relational or care ethics must be made explicit. The first being that, similar to the working logic of Gilligan's influential *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, it is important to distinguish the ethical considerations explored here as descriptive of the ways we make moral decisions with regards to relationships and care as opposed to prescriptive of any objective moral value. That is, when the focus is placed on our relationships, the interdependency of our needs and identities, and what they yield as opposed to individual appraisals and rote moral instruction, the strength of a feminist care ethics can be formally recognized in ways that challenge the "consistent observational and evaluative bias" Gilligan identifies as prevalent throughout the disciplines and in the male-centered theories that falsely purport to be gender-neutral (6). A feminist care ethics then exists in direct opposition to traditional interpretations of morality, derived overwhelmingly from Eurocentric philosophies and codified (and legislated) by men who, whether intentionally or not, reify the sorts of inequity Taylor positions the Logan family to overcome, regardless of the rule of law or decorum.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this article's interpretation of an ethics of care respectfully doesn't find its sole genesis in the works of Gilligan or Noddings in the 1980s, as Moran and so many other scholars have, but rather functions, again, as a descriptive framework, inclusive of all the ways historically and continually that the ethical workings of those most politically disregarded have so often been concerned with the relational, with the communal, with care. In this sense, in offering a reading of Taylor's work—published in 1976 but poignantly situated during the Great Depression and revisited regularly to this day—a reading informed by a feminist ethics of care, this article goes a step further and insists that Taylor's work, as well as the tradition of Black feminist thought that it emerges from, should be positioned in history and in praxis to (in turn) inform our understanding of a feminist ethics of care. When Patricia Hill Collins takes on the task of collecting, reclaiming, and reaffirming the intellectual contributions of Black women in her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), she notably comes to a conclusion similar to Gilligan's about the biases inherent to traditional ways of thinking and knowing. Collins writes:

Just as theories, epistemologies, and facts produced by any group of individuals represent the standpoints and interests of their creators, the very definition of who is legitimated to do intellectual work is not only politically contested, but is changing. (15)

That is to say, supposed theories, epistemologies, and facts about care may similarly represent the standpoints and interests of their creators, while neglecting those that have been historically delegitimized by, for example, white supremacy and patriarchy. It follows then that the ways we care for ourselves, each other, and those who are *othered*, may prove to be dissimilar based on our standpoints and their relation to power. Standpoints, in this sense, refer to perspectives, experiences, and knowledges unique to individuals and the groups that share them. This is key in

delineating ethical frameworks that rely on a false sense of objective right or wrong from those equipped to value subjectivity and acknowledge how power dynamics play such a large role in delegitimizing subjects and their ethical decisions. “Because group standpoints are situated in, reflect, and help shape unjust power relations,” according to Collins, a care ethics especially attuned to standpoints becomes keenly equipped to bring awareness to the situational and contextual, and forces us to be attentive to the vulnerabilities of others and ourselves in relational terms (25). Still, as this article contends, a Black feminist care ethics revisits how politically contentious these considerations can be and how assembling serious relationships to alternative standpoints may add significantly to ethical praxis.

Early on in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, after a long, tiresome walk down narrow, sun-splotched roads with early-October Mississippi dust billowing around each of the young brown-skinned children, Cassie Logan, an otherwise disciplined student, breaks a rule and takes a patently ethical stand at the severely underfunded all-Black Great Faith Elementary and Secondary School where her mother teaches and her three brothers all attend. After watching her youngest brother Little Man, on his first day of school, refuse the worn and tattered textbook marred visibly by more than a decade of use, and subsequently get a hard switch landed on his bottom for his trouble, Cassie opened her book to the stamp on the inside cover that must have triggered Little Man. The stamp reveals the racial lineage of their books, which were new in 1922 and assigned then to white students, but by 1933, in a state of obvious disrepair, have been relegated to “nigra” students (25). Cassie tries to defend her brother and explain to the teacher Miss Crocker the seemingly obvious apprehensions both children share about being so callously othered by, first, the white supremacist ideologies of the day, then their government, their

country, and now by their own school, supposedly their own textbooks. Miss Crocker doesn't seem to care. Taylor writes from Cassie's perspective:

This time Miss Crocker did look, but her face did not change. Then, holding up her head, she gazed unblinkingly down at me.

"S-see what they called us," I said, afraid she had not seen.

"That's what you are," she said coldly. "Now go sit down."

I shook my head, realized now that Miss Crocker did not even know what I was talking about. She had looked at the page and had understood nothing. (26-27)

The misrecognition in Miss Crocker's face clues both Cassie and readers to the sort of systemic opposition the Logan children face as they attempt simply to maintain their identities. Still, neither slur-riddled textbooks nor the threat of an authority diminishes the bond between brother and sister, which engenders an ethical stance from Cassie. She elects to receive the switch along with her brother.

Afterwards, Cassie wants to be the one to tell her mother about the incident and take responsibility. "From nine years of trial and error," Cassie reflects, "I had learned that punishment was always less severe when I poured out the whole truth to Mama on my own before she had heard anything from anyone else" (27). Miss Crocker beats her to it though. Still, the conversation with Miss Logan doesn't go as Miss Crocker had planned. Instead of praising the teacher for her disciplinary actions and the way she upheld the responsibilities teachers have to their materials, the relationship educators have to the policies that govern them, Miss Logan set about pasting paper over the disparagingly racist stamps in each of the textbooks and, in effect, challenging Miss Crocker's standpoint by way of reaffirming her own relationship and responsibility to her children. "Mary Logan, do you know what you're doing?" Miss Crocker

expresses, in shock, “Biting the hand that feeds you” (30). Cassie’s mother responds coolly with a laugh, “If that’s the case, Daisy, I don’t think I need that little bit of food,” all while Cassie quietly observes her mother continue to cover the stamps of each and every book (30). “I would wait until the evening to talk to her;” Cassie narrates, “there was no rush now. She understood” (31).

Throughout the story, feeling understood, listened to, cared for are reoccurring sentiments closely associated with Cassie’s emerging sense of fairness and equity and arguably the novel’s inquiry into right and wrong. Cassie being accosted on the streets of Strawberry, Mississippi solely for taking up space with her brown body by the equally bigoted and bratty Lillian Jean Simms is unconscionable in and of itself. “You can’t watch where you going, get in the road,” Lillian Jean spits at Cassie, “Maybe that way you won’t be bumping into decent white folk with your nasty self” (114). Despite an attempt, Lillian fails to push Cassie off of the sidewalk herself. Yet Cassie recounts how things escalate:

I braced myself and swept my arm backward, out of Lillian Jean’s reach. But someone caught it from behind, painfully twisting it, and shoved me off the sidewalk into the road. I landed bottom first on the ground.

Mr. Simms glared down at me. “When my gal Lillian Jean says for you to get yo’self off the sidewalk, you get, you hear?” (114)

The sheer malice of the Simms patriarch and heiress is obvious. The brazen racism and injustice in this episode isn’t even the first of the day for young Cassie Logan. Earlier, she was refused service at a nearby butcher simply for insisting that she was just as worthy of being acknowledged as the white customers. Still, while these affronts are surely upsetting, what Cassie grieves the most is arguably Big Ma, her grandmother, insisting that Cassie apologize to

Lillian Jean. Without fully seeing what Big Ma surely does as a white mob starts to form, Cassie picks herself from the street and continues:

“Big Ma!” I balked.

“Say it, child.”

A painful tear slid down my cheek and my lips trembled “I’m sorry... M-Miz...

Lillian Jean.”

When the words had been spoken, I turned and fled crying into the back of the wagon. No day in all my life had ever been as cruel as this one. (116)

Here Big Ma’s understanding of the situation is more developed than Cassie’s comparatively juvenile one. And while Cassie not feeling understood by her grandmother surely compounds the cruelty of the day, Taylor invokes a sort intergenerational care in Big Ma’s recognition of the overwhelmingly high price of her grandchild’s pride. Cassie reciprocates that care with dutiful respect for her grandmother, feigning respect for her oppressors, and, after an explicit conversation with Mama about “the way of things,” coming to a complicated, teary-eyed understanding (128). That evening, Cassie listens to Mama explain tenderly:

“Baby, we have no choice of what color we’re born or who our parents are or whether we’re rich or poor. What we do have is some choice over what we make of our lives once we’re here.” Mama cupped my face in her hands. “And I pray to God you’ll make the best of yours.” She hugged me warmly and motioned me under the covers.

(129)

Even though Cassie is put to bed, her ethical education is noticeably stirred by the complexity of care Big Ma and Mama show her in these most ostensibly uncaring times. Again, the caring is visibly grounded in relationships, but distinctions between the carer and cared-for are

importantly collapsed as parental figures care for a child that not only reciprocates but is likewise given a considerable task in caring for her own terribly vulnerable Black life.

Perhaps much of what endures in *Roll of Thunder* is the unfettered strength and unbreakable bond of the Logan household. In middle-grade accessible prose, Taylor depicts Cassie and her young brothers—the eldest Stacy, the younger Christopher John, and the aforementioned youngest Little Man—in generative relation to their Papa and Mama; Big Ma; the relatively militant Uncle Hammer, when he comes down from Chicago; and Mr. Morrison, a burly man down on his luck who the Logans take in as a farmhand and adopted family member. Readers are invited to experience the ways familial relationships, like the aforementioned mother-daughter shared understanding, engender political engagement and decision-making. It is a sibling bond that puts a daily injustice into focus for the Logan kids and compels them to dig the ditch that disables the whites-only school bus. Likewise, it is the bond to their children and their community that compels Mama and Papa to lead the boycott of the local Wallace store, owned and operated by the white family who has continued to discriminate against and tyrannize the Black sharecroppers and locals, who've had no other choice up to that point. These relational bonds engender decisions of undeniable ethical value while resisting legislated and inequitable expectations of ethical behavior. A Black feminist care ethics framework allows for an effective interpretation of these decisions by emphasizing the unique subjectivities of these characters.

The scale of ethical decision-making ranges from as small as Little Man's well-kept clothing to as large as Mr. Morrison's broad shoulders and imposing stature, which represents well the inclusivity inherent to a Black feminist ethics of care that emphasizes the relational and contextual. Likewise, the potential scope of this reading of Taylor's work extends beyond the antebellum plantations where Black people were property to the emerging 20th century where

the Logans proudly leverage their ownership of the land of their ancestors to support their community. Again, the ethical work remains situated firmly within relationships that construct the identities of these characters and contingent on their relation—whether through resistance or persistence—to some other. So perhaps similar to what Moran finds in L’Engle’s work, Taylor is able to show “the importance of relationality in finding one’s unique identity and connecting through apparent difference to find and appreciate the other as well” (87). This relational ethics implies not only care but love and, in turn, freedom, to borrow from historian Robin D. G. Kelley’s claim that the two are “the most revolutionary ideas available to us” (Nash 19). “[A]nd yet as intellectuals,” Kelley continues, “we have failed miserably to grapple with their political and analytical importance” (19).

A feminist ethics of care offers a similarly revolutionary lens to reading precisely because so many students already—to the chagrin of many educators—engage with texts based largely on how much they can relate to a character, care about them, even like or love them. Many educators are inclined to navigate conversations away from “I like this book because I liked so-and-so character” or “I could relate to so-and-so’s relationship to so-and-so” due to the perception that these aren’t critical or theoretical enough. In “Literary Theorists, Hear My Cry!” (1992), Jeffrey Willhelm is especially familiar with this phenomenon, using Taylor’s text and his own struggles teaching it as a springboard to him positing, “if you don’t work to read the text, then everything you do is looking in the mirror” (51). Willhelm then asserts:

Literature is better than a mirror; reading literature should be a unique and powerful way of knowing something new about yourself and about the world. Wayne Booth calls this “imaginative reversals of living” (1983); Kenneth Burke calls it “lived-through

experience (1957). By any name, this is the reading experience I want for my students.
(51)

A two-fold problem with this line of reasoning exists. Firstly, in how it takes a particularly privileged standpoint in the world to so easily belittle the value of mirrors, reflection, and seeing oneself. Secondly, it's unclear how supposedly caring for students and literature must result in homogenous, one-size-fits-all reading experiences. Perhaps, Willhelm's overall argument for students to learn to read and understand texts such as *Roll of Thunder* as if in direct conversation with the author is good-intentioned and ethically based in its own right. "To do otherwise," he maintains, "would be limiting and solipsistic" (51). The fact remains, however, that students simply may not care to be part of the "authorial audience" Willhelm suggests, and what they do care about cannot be disregarded or made subordinate to so-called literary theories (51).

Embracing theorists and critics such as Barthes, Genette, and Eco, Willhelm concludes that "what we read implies a complete world, and this world may be assumed to stand in some intelligible relationship to our own world," but doesn't allow for the possibility of incomplete worlds within a text and the heterogenous relationships readers may develop with them (56).

This last point is analogous to the circumstances of Mama's (Mrs. Mary Logan) eventual firing from teaching for her audacity to see the incompleteness of the Board of Education-approved literature at her disposal and desiring more for her students than what had been made available for them in our own world. Cassie watches the wealthy white male board members approach as her mother lectures extensively "on the cruelty of [slavery]; of the rich economic cycle it generated as slaves produced the raw products for the factories of the North and Europe; how the country profited and grew from the free labor of a people still not free" (183). Mrs. Logan is fairly consistent as an educator in this regard, caring for her students' standpoints as

Black children with unique relationships to the history of this country and the precarious spaces they inhabit today, just as she does for her own children. One of the school board member's mocking insistence that "You must be some kind of smart, Mary, to know more than the fellow who wrote that book. Smarter than the school board, too. I reckon," echoes Willhelm's contention that effective reading and learning requires a sort of reverent participation in an authorial audience (184). After Mrs. Logan's dismissal, Cassie reflects, "I had never really thought much about Mama's teaching before; that was just a part of her being Mama. But now that she could not teach, I felt resentful and angry, and I hated Mr. Granger" (185). The lack of consideration to her mother's work expressed here is poignantly childish, but the relationship Cassie shares with her mother remains key to unpacking the ethical issues of what's happened, and Cassie responds not theoretically but perhaps like many readers, young and old. *We* hate Mr. Granger. And within this project's commitment to relational thinking by way of Black feminist care ethics, expressions of care and relationality are precisely where the work starts. Admittedly frustrating at times, the phenomenon of students engaging to texts by way of liking, hating, or relating must, in fact, be cherished as it fosters the potential for care and political engagement, for love and potentially freedom.

The question then becomes how do we expect readers to relate to texts that actively attempt to challenge their "observational and evaluative bias"? For example, when we ask white readers to engage with the Logan family, as American educators of all racial backgrounds have done for nearly half a century, it seems a problem persists in that a self-centered relationship with the story would be insufficient. Likewise, readers not relating at all would be a disservice to the work, its subject matter, and quite possibly akin to the solipsism Willhelm warns of. In Wendy Saul and Kendra Wallace's qualitative study "Centering the Margins: White Preservice

Teachers' Responses to *Roll of Thunder*" (2002), white adult future educators express some apprehension engaging with Taylor's novel, even as they admit to seeing "*Roll of Thunder*, in particular, as profoundly influencing young readers" (45). Out of 71 white women who took a required course in children's literature and then were asked to generate dialogues about the novel, Saul and Wallace's study found widespread wariness about some of the language Taylor uses—especially the word "nigger" used "judiciously and realistically"—and a "surprising number of the white, preservice teachers chose to focus on the relatively undeveloped but positive white characters, or on the depiction of whites in general" (45-46). Likewise, white readers tended to not only protest the overall depiction of whites as racist but insist that (hypothetical) white children "may have their feelings similarly hurt by this vilification of whites" (46). That is, the white respondents to the study, by and large, responded to the difficult racial subject matter of the novel and the complex ethical framework advanced by its narrative "by constructing race as a domain of equal victimization and helplessness—blacks as victims of racism, and whites as victims of unfair, reverse racism" (51). In this sense, the descriptive interpretation of care ethics presented by this article reveals again that not all care is created equal. Not all care is attuned to the power discrepancies inherent to reading or relating to *others*. Therefore, not every reading of *Roll of Thunder* can be regarded as a *careful* reading.

For instance, in "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," Rudine Sims Bishop eloquently speaks to a power inherent to literature to make both the external world of human experience and the inner self visible to those who care to see it. She writes:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and

recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (ix)

Regrettably, lighting conditions are too rarely “just right” for many young readers, especially those most similar to the Logan children. Visibility remains just as pertinent to children’s literature as a whole as it does in the opening chapter of *Roll of Thunder* when aforementioned books in “very poor” condition derisively marked for “nigra” students fail to cast an equitable light on Cassie, Little Man, and their community (Taylor 25). Without Cassie and Little Man’s objections, the window remains opaque. Without Mama’s understanding, the reflection remains inaccurate. Without care, the sliding door remains closed to inclusion.

Accordingly, in “Reflections on the Development of African American Children's Literature,” Sims Bishop recalls setting out to “analyze as many of the existing contemporary Black-inclusive children’s fiction books as [she] could find,” and the organizing principle of her research seems to suggest similar divergences in literary care (6). After critically looking at 150 books published between 1965 and 1979, she identifies three categories: “social conscience” books, “melting pot” books, and “culturally conscious” books (Bishop 7). Titles in the first category tended to have white readers as their intended audience, encouraging their development of a “social conscience,” usually at the expense of thoughtful characterization of Black peoples. “Like the social conscience books,” Sims Bishop writes, “most of the melting pot books were written by [white] authors” and tended to ignore any qualities of race other than skin color in their illustrations (7). In a practical sense, these first two categories feature books written and

distributed ostensibly not to care for Black children, but for the sensibilities of white readers. Just as the ethical reading of literature may require an aforementioned *carefulness*, an ethical “writing transaction,” where writers and creators “are always transacting with a personal, social, and cultural environment,” also requires an attention to care (Rosenblatt 7). Sims Bishop’s analysis suggests the slow but eventual development of a body of African American children’s literature that prioritizes caring for its readership of all races by addressing their “right to books that reflect their own images and books that open less familiar worlds to them” (9). Despite Jeffrey Willhelm’s complete dismissal of the literary value of mirrors and reflection, the last category, where *Roll of Thunder* is a notable example, “set[s] out to reflect both the distinctiveness of African American cultural experiences and the universality of human experience” (7). In this, Taylor’s novel is representative of a Black feminist care ethic not in spite of but precisely because it is attuned to equity for all children while maintaining its focus on those children who have been historically neglected.

Where Moran concludes that L’Engle’s novels propose we “empathize with otherness, to disrupt the antagonist self-other dynamic,” Taylor’s work suggests a similar path towards supplementing an ethics of care with what Jennifer Nash calls a “politics of love” to potentially move away from the self-other dynamic and fully embrace difference (87). In her article “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” Nash calls upon Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and June Jordan to argue that “the labor of crafting a collectivity constructed around difference requires a “serious...undertaking,” the task of working on—or perhaps even against—the self” (11). The implication here—as it is when the Logan family must work tirelessly to secure their family, their livelihoods, their identities, while challenging the white supremacy that threatens it all—is that fundamental to effective caring may be a focus on

ourselves, but not necessarily the security of that self or the fixity of its standpoint. What Nash's politics of love provides then is an affective project, a "serious undertaking," and an alternative method of relating the self to others without antagonism.

At novel's end, when Papa is revealed to have started the great fire that nearly engulfs the cotton fields—white crops, Black crops, and sharecrops alike—just to save a local boy T.J. from a lynching, the care that generations of the Logans have shown their land is overshadowed by a quick decision to risk it all. The white landowners turned their attentions to fighting the fire alongside the Black community they've relentlessly antagonized, both sides recognizing in the other their complicated but invaluable relationship to this land. T.J. is a troublemaker, not Cassie's friend, not a family member, but a young Black boy who, corrupted by the insecurity and insidiousness of white supremacy cast upon a Black body, tumbles down a path of crime and poor decisions, which will inevitably lead to a brutal end. But not today. Throughout the novel, T.J. Avery and his sharecropping family are cast in palpable contrast to the Logan children. Cassie witnesses—and moreover narrates to the reader in her thoughtfully adolescent voice—T.J. lashing out against everything her parents have tried to instill in her and her brothers, everything they care about. T.J. brags about avoiding all forms of work to a family that takes hard work, including but not limited to community service and working the land, so seriously it delays the start of their schoolyear. Likewise, where Cassie learns a hard lesson from her mother about the value of education in the face of great adversity, T.J. gets caught cheating on a history exam and subsequently becomes the informant that gets Mama fired from teaching. And while the Logans and other Black families attempt to establish some semblance of economic autonomy by boycotting the Wallace's store, T.J. continually frequents the store and its bootleg liquor-

selling backroom. Cassie finds T.J. confoundingly smarmy and precarious, and her narration characterizes him accordingly.

Even Stacey expresses to Papa reservations about his friendship with T.J. and the possibility of the white, guileless, younger brother of Lillian Jean, Jeremy Simms being a better friend. “Far as I’m concerned,” Papa responds bluntly, within earshot of Cassie, “friendship between black and white don’t mean that much ‘cause it usually ain’t on a equal basis” (157). Here Papa is careful not to admonish his son for liking or even caring for the Simms boy. Likewise, Papa in no way endorses T.J. and his problematic decision-making. Yet, the potential for equity—notably not equality with regards to class or age or standpoint but rather an “equal basis”—remains essential to the bonds that hold this narrative together as well as this article’s theoretical reading of care ethics. To Stacey, Cassie, and readers, Papa speaks directly to how care works and to his own praxis. He speaks also to how inequality is anathema to care, and how, in the context of the narrative and the racial history of the United States, all care and relationships are simply not created equal. A Black feminist care ethics sheds meaningful light on these realities, while also providing language to realities that remain difficult to describe.

As the titular thunder gives way to the salve of rain and prevents the fire Papa set to the land from consuming much more, Cassie reflects on T.J. She thinks as the novel ends:

I had never liked T.J., but he had always been there, a part of me, a part of my life, just like the mud and the rain, and I had thought that he always would be. Yet the mud and the rain and the dust would all pass. I knew and understood that. What had happened to T.J. in the night I did not understand, but I knew it would not pass. And I cried for those things which had happened in the night and would not pass.

I cried for T.J. For T.J. and the land. (276)

Cassie cries because she cares, and this particular sort of care is valuable in ways that only a Black feminist care ethic can evince. *Roll of Thunder* features at its core a family in the rural Mississippi of the 30s, and as Cassie reflects here, this novel presents an invaluable reconfiguration of self-hood in terms of her relationships to her family, her community, and the space they inhabit. That is, while this article argues for a theory of Black feminist care ethics in its reading of Cassie's narrative, an implication must also remain that Cassie's narrative is already sufficiently theoretical in the vein that Black feminist thought imparts and Barbara Christian notably remarks in "The Race for Theory" (1987). "For people of color have always theorized," Christian writes, "but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract knowledge" (52). Taylor's novel is not only an exemplar of the literary utility of a Black feminist care ethics framework but instead embodies its praxis. Young Cassie's thoughtful meditations on those things which had happened and "would not pass" are productively situated within a tradition of work that is simultaneously theorized and embodied, taught and learned, cared by and cared for. It is from this theoretical reconfiguration and expansion of the self that we can begin to be able to describe our relations and ethical responsibilities to others.

"[E]thics," according to Brittney Cooper, "which should not be equated with moral regulation, keeps us focused on the world we are trying to build, and joins us to a multi-generational project of dismantling systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism" (19). Love, then, or Nash's love politics, must then be understood as a "practice of self, a labor of the self, that forms the basis of political communities rooted in a radical ethic of care" (Nash 14). Paired together, this enterprise—a care ethics of love, a loving politics of care—isn't simply about what we should do, but what we *can* do, *can* build, *can* create, and who we

can do it with. That is, the way to care about others with regards to our collective freedom, unsurprisingly, is love politics.

When bell hooks writes about the bleak political circumstances of children in the contemporary United States—the lovelessness faced by children abused, starved, tortured, and murdered by the institutions and peoples supposedly most situated to protect them—she determines pointedly that “There can be no love without justice,” suggesting first that love necessitates some political consideration to equity and ethics. Likewise, hooks hints at the possibility of a love freed from manipulative misuse and the deceptive trappings of romanticization. The love politics suggested in this article follows her lead, reaffirming love as not necessarily pretty or sweet, light or easy, but always political, which is a strength. In this, love can be as richly dark as Mississippi soil or as loud and resonant as thunder. But while hooks’ maxim establishes firmly that love requires justice, this article asserts plainly, with the help of Taylor’s indispensable work, that there can similarly be no justice without love, a love recognizable in the relations we already cherish and the ethical commitments they engender, but a love uniquely reconfigured by a Black feminist lens for its radical potential.

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